

SCENTS OF LIFE

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I'd like to be able to say it's not just another run-of-the-mill biography. It wouldn't be truth, though. This modest account of my life is precisely common, indistinguishable from others, similar in terms of content and form to hundreds of thousands other biographies in the world. The only thing that makes my book just a little bit special is the fact that when I was writing it, I kept thinking of my family and friends, as well as people I've had the pleasure to meet and places I've visited in my life.

Since the dawn of human ignorance and helplessness, a dispute whether there is some point in our lives or not has been taking place. It's good for us to delude ourselves from time to time that we know the answer to that question. At the moment, my answer is: "leave behind as many great things as possible". I've certainly managed to leave something - my wonderful children and grandchildren, to whom I want to dedicate this book. I'd like to add something more to become a keepsake to remember me after I breathe my last, concluding my happy life.

I'd like this book to perform that function, in addition to making my family happy and providing entertainment in the evenings to all the readers. Despite its not being huge as far as its content is concerned, it's probably one of the last things I'm able to offer the future generations with.

To those I love.

M.

Introduction

Tolstoy in his “Anna Karenina” wrote that all happy families are similar. There’s a chance he was right. However, the question is where to look for such families. Show me at least one family that is felicitous, has healthy relations, doesn’t have to tackle any diseases, traumas or any other, smaller or bigger, family catastrophes. Naturally, Tolstoy was fully aware of the reality, therefore he created a masterpiece that treats, among others, of human relations suffused with intricacies. In any case, I’m not aiming at correcting the master, nor discussing with his views. Nothing of this sort. A book you’re holding in your hand is just another story of an individual in the background of their family life and, in a wider perspective, their country, the whole world, society. This story is one of many and exceptional at the same time, just like our lives and fates are unique, our joys can’t be duplicated, and our sufferings can’t be measured.

Marta’s story wasn’t made up. There really is a person who, despite the complication of her life, kept getting off the tiger’s back thanks to her shrewdness, honesty, and strong will. She was very lucky, too. But she deserved this luck since she had to cope with so much difficulties. Her story is

neither supposed to teach anybody a lesson, nor to be a warning of any sort. It describes life that can't be judged or summarized in three short sentences. It shall spark contemplation upon the role of coincidence, circumstances, and fate in our lives. And then even further, how relevant are the choices we make and how it is that sometimes we just can't do anything about a given situation.

All happy families and all happy people are alike. There are, however, no fully happy families and fully happy people. Here we arrive at the conclusion that all families and all people are unique and different from each other. Their lives consist of joys and sorrows, ups and downs, reverses of Fortune and its smiles, health and disease, happiness and unhappiness, faith and its absence, hope and hopelessness, hard work and sweet relaxation. The way we judge our lives at the end of our journeys depends on the proportions of the above-listed elements, on the choices we've made, on whether we've managed to always, or at least mostly, be faithful to ourselves, our instincts, beliefs, and values. Family and friends are also crucial.

At a certain point of her life, Marta became aware that she knew very little about her family. Not about children and grandchildren, but about her roots, her origin, and the things and situations that were responsible for making her as she

was, not different. One day, her own son put her to shame by pointing out the fact that she didn't even take the trouble to study her family tree. Marta decided to make up for this oversight. It started to snowball and kept moving towards an avalanche. She was successful in her quest and managed to find family that she hadn't even been aware had existed; she found her own identity and decided to write this book. At one point, Marta was scared that her grate grandchildren may come upon the same issue - they wouldn't know where they come from and how to get to know their destination. She decided to facilitate it for them and write down everything that might possibly aid them in the search for their own identities. The result of this decision is the book you're holding in your hands.

The beginning

Marta was born in Szczecin in August 1947. This fact seems simple and obvious, like all the firm and undeniable things in life. However, the issue of her date of birth was the first thing in her life that the ruthless fortune put the question mark on. Since Marta's identity card always clearly said August 1947, who would have thought that the girl was in fact born in May 1947 in Sokołów Podlaski?

In defiance of what befits a law-abiding citizen, Marta's father, having been sturdily stressed out by angry civil servant breathing down his neck and aware of the severe punishment administered for the belated registration of birth, committed an ignominious crookedness towards the people's government and gave the false date of birth of the newly born citizen. Years later, Marta had a chance to read her birth certificate and learnt the truth. Supposedly, the only things that changed was her sign of the zodiac and the fact that she was a few months older. Green, bursting with life May turned into the end of harvesting and a feeling of the inevitably coming fall. If human lives were inscribed in stars, Marta had been looking on a fabricated map for decades. Maybe this explains something, or maybe not.

A form which he filled in was well-known to him. This young man of noble descent had already begotten several children. He took up residence in the then Lublin Voivodeship with his first wife. This story is sorrowful as well as vague, nowadays. After giving birth to three children, his wife passed away and her place was taken by a youthful maid, who consoled him and provided for further genetic continuity. We can only imagine why this happened. A man with three children was probably frightened of staying alone for the rest of his life. Looking for an appropriate person is a time-consuming process that doesn't have to necessarily end successfully. However, in his vicinity, there was a woman, whom he had already known. She was a lot younger, beautiful, and he could acquire support from her. From her point of view, it was a chance to have a mature man by her side, advance socially, and find her spot on the planet Earth. Of course, these are only presumptions. What really appealed them to one another is a secret the two of them had already taken to their graves. Anyway, an undeniable fact is that stepping against the will of the working class - not only bureaucratically - was in Władysław's blood. It couldn't be the other way since he spent his most vital years in opposition against the authorities on behalf of "criminal" Home Army, which used

to be the strongest and exceptionally well-organized military force offering active resistance to the occupier during World War II. When in a memorable September of 1939, Poland was invaded both by Nazi Wehrmacht and Soviet army (within the confines of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a document so fatal for Poles), Home Army used to be a core of the underground resistance of the society that neither accepted being slaves of the Aryan race, nor becoming communist farmers and workers, divested of any individuality.

Naturally, the scale of Home Army's actions was limited to its feasible, not very impressive abilities. As befits guerilla warfare, the "boys" from Home Army used to plan acts of sabotage and subversive destruction. In 1941, the German giant was already preparing for the initiation of Operation Barbarossa - aggression on the Soviet Union through the "Polish corridor". They started to concentrate shock troops in Poland and brought in airplanes, tanks, ammunition, petrol and other "military goods". Poles didn't have enough soldiers any more, so they couldn't carry on fighting German divisions. Therefore, they kept themselves occupied with attacks on trains, truck convoys, smaller patrols, or at least ammunition depots. Every action that impeded the German crow's hunting, was a glorious action. Some people, what's

easily understandable, wanted peace and didn't bother themselves with soldiering and behaved as if they were waiting for Hitler to turn them into his Slavic slaves, as he had earlier announced. Marta's father certainly didn't belong to this group and didn't even want to. Similar to the whole bunch of other men, who were big-hearted, courageous, tragic, often funny. They lived being aware of the fact that often the only thing they could do was to hang out a sheer curtain on their enemy's way. A piece of fabric, unnoticeable to the enemy, which will be treaded, run over by tanks. Still, they hung those curtains out one by one, gritting their teeth. A sea of curtains, a forest of curtains. With curtains on the enemy, with curtains into enemy. Lost, entangled in curtains. People say that Poles have resistance against strangers in their nature. It's been encoded for generations. Mythical mothers feed their mythical little citizens with blood, not milk. Maybe this is the reason. Maybe the reason is the most popular game young boys so eagerly played for 123 years, during the period of Partitions. The game was called "let's regain independency". They usually lost, suspended between several contradictory strategies. Shall we start from scratch? Shall we spark another uprising? Shall we be soldiers or teachers who spread enlightenment? World War I brought relief. Our boys won their independency. What a joy! It's

interesting, what would have happened if this independency lasted longer. What would they play? Unfortunately, 1939 came soon. It's a bit like giving a child a lollipop after long whining and then taking it back as a punishment for something. After so many years of playing "let's regain independency", they truly deserved their lollipop. It would be a source of necessary calories and energy to play further with bravura. Yet, they only managed to lick it a bit. Enzymes in saliva didn't have time to dissolve the outer caramel coating. Rainbow-colored straps on the lollipop didn't even start to blend. A nice man with a bizarre moustache and another nice man with a lush moustache wrapped the candy back in the worn-out cellophane and put it on a very high shelf. But the boys didn't intend to give in. They decided to get the lollipop back. Constructions made of chairs that negated the laws of physics were being built and the boys climbed them arduously every day, risking their lives. Curtains were being hung out on every possible front line.

They saw things that no child dreaming about a lollipop should see. Things that no man should see. Things that shouldn't even happen. But they did happen and changed the history of the world and of millions small worlds of single families. Nobody knew that but Marta's father must have

known a lot. He must have known “too much”, like most men on their prime in those horrible times. According to common knowledge being spread by trendy psychologists, this “too much” can change a man, people who are close to that person, and people who are close to those people. This change reverberates for generations to come and probably we will never stop wiping marks of blood, guts and tears off the presumably clean, postwar, newly-built walls.

Yes, Władysław was a member of Home Army. It would have been weird if he hadn't - a well-born man from a patriotic family whose youth fell on the period of national revival (in 1918, he did his two years in the military service), thus he must have missed the lost freedom. His portfolio contained a photograph of him with Pilsudski, so this is obliging. Apart from being a Polish patriot, he had more profitable and safe occupation - he held a post of a gamekeeper in Żyrzyn in the then Lublin Voivodeship. In any case, not only there. He had aspirations to climb the hierarchical ladder of this profession to the top and obtain the forest officer rank. Therefore, he gradually pursued his profession, gaining experience and knowledge required for getting a promotion.

Nevertheless, Władysław didn't waste time. He was determined not only to lay down his life for the country but also to provide for its future elites. In order to do so, he begot his first child in a new relationship (a fourth one in general) in 1944. In principle, his new wife had been already experienced in taking care of children since she had been looking after three kids of her late employer. These children never had high regard for their father's second wife. They found it hard to accept her, especially when we consider the fact that the oldest child was only five years younger than their stepmother.

While little is known about the first wife, the second one, who was Marta's mother, was allegedly as beautiful as diligent. Everyone praised her clean singing, which used to amuse family and guests of the home. Although the father belonged to the "intelligentsia" and the mother originated from the working class, they seemed to form a perfect couple that complemented each other in everything they did. Especially in the good things they did but sometimes in worse things, as well. From the point of view of the new Polish authorities, their marriage was a regular *mésalliance*. What's surprising, they never encountered any problems with that but they did have to tackle some factors hindering them from peacefully living their lives.

Not only Władysław struggled with the German crowd. In a world of the incessant fight, he had a chance to taste the Ukrainian nationalism that used to throw its weight around in the eastern parts of the country under the name of Ukrainian Insurgent Army with its leader nationalist Bandera. The Ukrainian had their sight set at a whole bunch of enemies that threatened their sovereignty. This nation, similar to Poles, was determined to obtain their coveted independence and this feeling was intensified by the vision of Bolsheviks' comeback. The memory of Bolsheviks leading to the great famine in the country and murdering local populations in revenge for political resistance was still fresh at that time. World War II, being a destabilization for all areas of life in most European countries, was also a great opportunity to publicize postulates, usually with the aid of rifles and clubs. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army came into being in 1942, so its main enemy was the German army that occupied land of Ukraine at the time. Still, everyone who doubted Ukraine's right to sovereignty or "unlawfully" settled down on its historic grounds could become a victim of a nationalist intoxicated with fanaticism or any other alcoholic beverage.

For this last reason, Władysław barely saved his life in a confrontation with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army activists

who attacked his village. A village in which - what an irony - he was hiding from the Germans after he escaped from the Nazi camp. The nationalists thrashed him, as a representative of Polish partitioners, mercilessly with chains till he fell down in swoons, which turned out to be his redemption. He managed to get through this in one piece.

After war, still as a member of Home Army, Władysław was supposed to be able to delightfully breathe in air still mixed with black smoke of the country destroyed by the war. He would certainly remember its taste for the rest of his life. Only those who see the war and it suddenly ends, can breathe the ambrosia. There are probably very few things comparable to this feeling. To leave home, come out onto the street where there is no THEM anymore. To see a tree, a child, a cigarette thrown on a sidewalk, a smoke from a factory's chimney that works again after years of stoppage. To go to the park, sit on a bench and read a newspaper. To live. To be one of those who survived. Not because God had chosen them or because they had been somehow better than others, whose names and locations of their graves we don't even know. Those who just survived. A coincidence, a stroke of fate, it doesn't matter. There's no death anymore, it all has ended, it's alright now. We can eat potatoes from a bonfire. We can talk about future. We can grumble about

rain that hasn't stopped for three days. No matter what, we can do what we want to, provided we don't talk about the past. Blood, guts and tears should be washed away under the table.

Yet, in Stalin's vision of socialism, freedom and joy could be either socialist or none. Władysław, who was accustomed to active resistance, found it hard to accept that, contrary to millions of Poles tired out by the war. After 1945, he succumbed to a serious illness. So serious that he was forced to write a farewell letter to his wife while he was hiding from the Public Security in a basement somewhere in Szczecin, by courtesy of his Home Army colleagues. Since he neither had money nor strength to buy a postage stamp, he threw it out the window with a written request. Anyone who should find it was asked to send it at a given address. He must have not particularly counted on human kindness. It must have been a gesture of despair. Or he just wanted to ensure himself that he really did everything he could and couldn't do anything more. However, someone found his letter. Up to this day, we don't know who that person was and what drove him or her. Maybe it was sad romanticism of this story that pushed him or her into doing it or maybe this person felt obliged as a Christian. Anyway, Władysław's wife through this atypical correspondence learnt that her

husband was on his deathbed. She was asked to take care of his children from the previous marriage, not mentioning her own child. She did so.

In 1945, when the war was on its last leg, Władysław's wife took a train together with their four children to visit him in his hideout. They were supposed to meet in an arranged place. In those times, traveling by railway was an insecure undertaking. Even though the war has formally ended, it left an imprint of the specter of death and tragedy on the people. Unlucky enough, the bridge on their way had been blown up by the Germans. The engine driver wasn't aware of that and the locomotive sped confidently on the rail tracks which suddenly came to an end. Scenes of trains falling into rivers are rare even in the movies but those who survived that crash certainly remembered it frame by frame for the rest of their lives. Our hero and her four children got through the accident in one piece, even though one of the children was hanging from the car by a hand that got stuck somewhere. The woman made the remnant of the journey dressed only in a white shirt she was carrying for her husband. Władysław managed to get out of death's clutches which almost jammed on his body that was heavily worn-out by the war. Today's doctors would call his condition "stable". In any case, his condition was stable enough to let him look for work in his

former profession. Finding work turned out to be a pretty difficult task. The reason for that was not only Polish economy that fell into ruin, but also more mundane fact: Władysław didn't have in his pocket a document that was getting more and more significant at the time. Yes, this document was a written certification of membership in the only rightful Party, no matter behind what political mask it hid in the post-war years. So it's not true that everyone who signed up for the Party did so because of their ideological and idealistic love for socialist order. No, this mass party, with its usual number of members circling around 1.500.000 people (even 3.092.000 people at its peak), used to recruit people who otherwise would be dismissed from their jobs or wouldn't get a post, a promotion, a raise, a housing letter, or many other things so desirable in life. There are records of people signing up for the Party and then being disciplinarily expelled for not attending not even one assembly. Some - and these were in the minority - found it disgraceful to own this innocent-looking little book, a document certifying membership in Polish United Worker's Party. Such impractical things as honor, intermediary values and ideas appealed to some people as a reason to disdainfully reject the chance to become a party member. Since Poles are the nation of romantics, who more beautifully die for a proper idea than

for another man, such instances were recorded. There were also people with a negative VIP reference, who preferred to be inconspicuous in order not to draw the authorities' attention. Those had to look for other solutions.

Because of lack of other potential solutions, Władysław had to pull the last ace out of his sleeve. This ace was his friend in a local forest inspectorate who helped him get the post of a gamekeeper in Pniewy. This line of work was accompanied by some inconveniences. First, as a gamekeeper, he was a casual worker, not bound by a contract of employment, which meant that he could lose his job at any moment. Second, he was left with no alternative but to sign up for the hated Reds. The only thing he could do was to elude being active in terms of Party's affairs, to spite his adversaries. Why, they deserved it! Civil servants, partly originating from these political circles, decided to ignore his years of experience (but, how awful!, prewar) and offered him work as a gamekeeper, not well-earned post of a forest officer.

This way, a family with a somewhat complicated story ended up in the backwoods. Here, Marta's life really began and maybe this was when firmness of a wild girl and bravery of a Polish postwar incarnation of Pocahontas were instilled into her. As it turned out after years, this life, quite difficult

one, armed her to the teeth. It gave her a weapon that helped her cope with all the mysterious coincidences she encountered on her way all the time.

Pniewy Ocean

Since its beginning, Marta's life wasn't normal and obvious. Her family was cloaked in mist. All that was known was that there was "something", but no words of explanation have ever been said. It was just after the war. Nobody knew what would happen this time, what fate would Polish people, so experienced by history, meet. All newspapers propagated the new beginning, people were bursting with enthusiasm and preferred to forget about torments of war. Very few had an inkling something was not right, that it wasn't so cutesy as the newspapers wrote, that maybe all this chutzpah was heading towards a huge nationwide tragedy. They decided to keep a low profile. It wasn't clear what the consequences of doing certain things were, what people could say, what people could do, to what extent people could stand against, how inadvisable it was to have one's own opinion, different from the one established by the Party. There were no conversations about that in Marta's home as well as in many Polish homes at that time. Nobody talked about Home Army, Katyń, the big injustice. It had to be erased, forgotten. Or drunk away. Suit yourself.

The younger you are today, the more difficult it is to imagine all that. It's hard to write these words because they have been lately completely discredited but the fact is that (it causes a toothache) history of Poland was ruthlessly falsified. Friedrich Nietzsche's explanation that there are no facts, just interpretations, doesn't help here. For the decades after the war, people who experienced this history, who were convinced they were fighting for a good cause, must have suffered a huge historical trauma when the authorities were trying to make them believe that what they remembered hadn't have happened, that they were the traitors. This trauma reverberated in the psyche of their children and grandchildren for generations ahead. They were fed with bitterness and the sense of injustice. Marta, as a daughter of Home Army soldier, wasn't an exception.

Pniewy seemed to be a perfect place for a special person to spend her childhood. For centuries, the place had belonged to consecutive archbishops and popes, then to local feudalists, and in the end, after the war, what shouldn't be a surprise, ended up as a property of the State Treasury, which didn't tolerate any other ownership within its borders than the ownership of the working people of towns and villages. However, the uniqueness of this place hasn't been the result of its history, after all a pretty typical one.

Genowefa
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Scents of life



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